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ABSTRACT

A credit-based qualifications system within the framework proposed in the Dearing "Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds" could enhance the United Kingdom (UK) qualification system in the 21st century. The United Kingdom currently has over 14,000 qualifications and more than 100 awarding bodies, which makes it difficult to compare qualifications and address areas of overlap and duplication. The key steps in building a credit framework are as follows: (1) each qualification/award will consist of units, where each unit is an agreed set of learning outcomes; (2) all units will be assigned to one of four levels within the post-14 education system (and three levels for higher education and professional qualifications); and (3) the "credit value" of units will be formed by coordinating the notational learning time set for learners to achieve each unit's learning outcomes. The value and level of units achieved by learners will be indicated on a nationally recognized credit transcript that could serve as the front sheet of the new National Record of Achievement and be used by admissions tutors and employers. The proposed credit-based qualifications system will offer important benefits to learners, education and training providers, employers, and the United Kingdom as a whole. (MN)

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ED 404 510

FEDA's 2020 Vision:

Why we need a credit-based qualifications system

FEDA **Further Education Development Agency**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This leaflet provides a brief and straightforward description of how FEDA thinks a credit framework could enhance the UK qualification system in the 21st century.

It explains why we need such a system, how it works and how it would benefit everyone taking part and involved in education and training.

This system is consistent with the framework proposed in the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*, and will help to move the national qualifications framework further forward. It will not only help learners now and in future with more uncertain job markets, but also support the achievement of National Targets and UK global competitiveness.

CONTENTS

Context and background	2
The key problem	3
The vision	4
The proposal	5
How it works	6
The benefits	7
Your questions answered	8

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The economic and social future of the UK and its citizens depends on education and training.

We need to improve everyone's predisposition to, participation in and achievement through, learning. Learning needs to be lifelong — not a one-off event which stops after school. It needs to be:

- **accessible** to more people
- **adaptable** to changing requirements of population and workplace
- **flexible** so that more people can learn the right skills at the right time
- **rigorous and relevant** with appropriate forms of assessment
- **valued and understood** so that learners know where they stand and employers know what to look for

Our current national provision meets some of these needs by offering a wide range of full and part-time learning opportunities for people of all ages and circumstances — through qualifications, awards and certificates; academic, vocational and applied learning; and through training schemes. But, although we have a comprehensive, all-encompassing provision, three key questions need to be asked:

It is recognised that the Dearing Report has addressed some of these issues, though FEDA believes that many questions still remain

Q Are these learning opportunities, and the achievements in them, linked together in a readily understandable way?

Q Is the language used for describing achievement widely understood and shared by learners, professionals and other users?

Q Are learners (or anyone else) easily able to compare the qualifications and programmes available?

If the answers to these questions are 'No', are we getting the best from our system? This leaflet provides some answers and suggests a solution which improves existing provision and helps the development of new opportunities.

'Learning needs to be life-long, not a one-off event'

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

The confused world of learning: Imagine you want to learn, with a view to gaining employment. You have a huge range of choices in front of you. Each folder represents a qualification, and each sheet a unit, but these are randomly scattered in front of you. They have titles, but no description, no comparative value and are difficult to understand. How easy is it to make the right choice?

the key problem

There are over 14,000 qualifications and more than 100 awarding bodies. It is not that there are too many learning opportunities, rather that it is difficult to compare and understand where qualifications stand in relation to one another and to identify and address areas of overlap and duplication.

Put simply, there is no single agreed way to measure and describe learning achievement. For a student like Jo, a tutor like Jim and an employer like Liz, the implications are:

For learners:	
It limits a learner's understanding of their place on the educational ladder, and what they have achieved to date.	*Jo is not sure if a GNVQ is worth as much as five GCSEs, or whether it is at a higher level than her other achievements*
It impairs judgement over what new learning programme is required and which opportunities are recognised.	*Jo is seeking a particular course/job, but is not sure whether her achievements to date will count or what learning is available to attain them*
It demotivates them from continuing to learn — both now and in the future.	*Jo has been advised by (equally unsure) parents that FE is not worth it because Jo could be earning money now*
For admission tutors / employers:	
It makes comparing achievement impossible across qualifications so it is difficult to shortlist candidates.	*Jim would like to shortlist Jo for a course place /job, but is unclear how Jo's range of qualifications add up and compare with others*
It demotivates employers from promoting new learning opportunities to their existing employees.	*Liz wants to develop Jo's skills but does not understand which course would build on existing skills and suit both Jo and the company*

THE PROBLEM

'Comparing achievement is impossible across qualifications'

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Trying to make sense of your choices: You have separated, in an *ad-hoc* way, the folders (qualifications and awards) available in the world of learning. Although it is easier to see your potential choice, it is still impossible to understand the context of each, and how they compare with each other. Your choice is clearer but remains confused.

FEDA's vision is straightforward and logical. Learners should be able to understand and compare their achievements more easily. It is accepted that the same achievement may be valued differently depending on the purpose and context in which it is used. Equally qualifications of the same size and level will be valued differently depending on purpose.

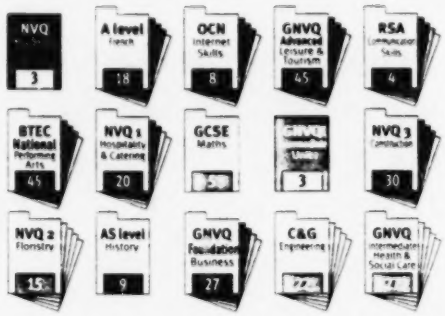
FEDA believes that enabling learners to earn credit for their achievement aids motivation and that attaching 'credit value' to qualifications and units helps learners, providers, planners and funders understand and compare achievement more effectively. Proposals in the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* will help by introducing clear levels within the framework, but a common means of specifying qualifications and comparing their size is still needed.

A new common currency and language are needed to give learners a better predisposition towards learning and allow them at any age...

...to place the value of their own achievements in context with the world of learning and employment.	*Jo now understands that a GNVQ holds the same value as five GCSEs and that other units achieved are at intermediate level. Admissions tutors and employers also understand this*
...to recognise what new learning they require, what opportunities exist, and which direction they must travel.	*Jo realises that to have a better chance of getting a course place/job, further achievements are required in key areas*

This vision need not alter the value or characteristics of existing qualifications and awards. Indeed, by making achievement more understandable and placing it in context, it will improve performance within existing learning, and provide directions for its further development. This approach has been successfully piloted in many FE colleges and universities nationwide. In Wales there is a national credit scheme and college funding will be based on credits from 1997.
This vision has been developed by FEDA over the last five years into a well argued proposal — **the building of a credit-based qualifications system.**

'Learning achievement needs to have a common currency and language'



THE VISION

Helping to make sense of your choices: The folders remain separated in an *ad-hoc* way, but now, as well as a title, they have three new identifying characteristics: a description of what learning is expected, a colour representing the level of difficulty/demand; and a number indicating the value of achievement. The world of learning has the potential to be less confusing.

FEDA proposes that all learning is specified in terms of units of assessment. A unit is a set of learning outcomes. To ensure absolute coherence and avoid fragmentation within subjects, it can be of any size. It is possible that a single unit could itself be an entire award or qualification. Each unit will consist of the following:

Title	a well defined and specific (subject) name
Learning outcome	what a learner is expected to know, understand and do
Assessment criteria	standards for achieving outcomes
Level	level of difficulty/achievement (seven are proposed from the National Curriculum to HE/professional qualifications)
Credit value	a numerical value derived from unit size

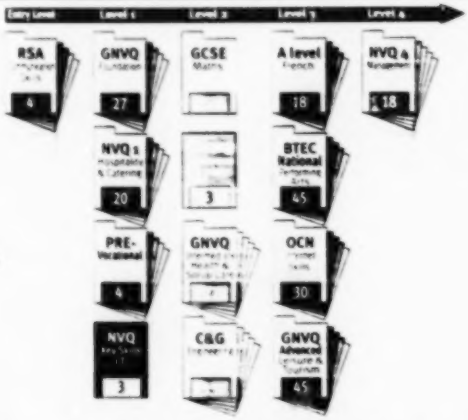
Unitisation will create a full range of **units**, each with specified **learning outcomes**, built and assessed around agreed **criteria**, with a defined **level** of difficulty and a **credit value**.

Unitisation offers benefits for everyone. Learning will be more *adaptable* because changes can be made more easily through units. It provides greater *flexibility* and *choice* to learners because they can tailor their learning on a unit basis, rather than a qualification basis. Implicit in this is the opportunity to learn in more *manageable* amounts, and be rewarded for that, which provides greater *motivation* to learners. It provides a *language* for describing all achievement — through a unit's learning outcomes — and numerical measure of achievement through credit values and levels. Above all, it provides a very *practical* architecture for developing new learning opportunities.

A learner can achieve individual units and have each recorded in a standard way through credits at various levels. Employers could specify minimum job requirements in this way too.

Jo has achieved one A level worth 18 credits at Level 3, one GCSE (5 credits at Level 2) and a unit in secretarial skills (5 credits at Level 1). Anyone interested in Jo's achievements can understand and compare them with achievements of others

THE PROPOSAL



'A very practical architecture for developing new learning opportunities'

An organised world of learning: The folders have now been arranged by level, starting with the least difficult/demanding on the left. You can see what each folder is worth, how they compare to other folders and what is expected of you. Each folder contains sheets of paper which represent and describe the units that make up the qualification or award. The world of learning is understandable.

Building the Framework

The key steps in building the Credit Framework are straightforward. Some, indeed, are already happening:

Unitising existing qualifications — **Each qualification or award will consist of units, where each unit is an agreed set of learning outcomes.** Many qualifications, for example, NVQs & GNVQs are already expressed in units.

Setting the level of each unit — **All units, and hence qualifications and awards, will be ascribed to one of four levels within post-14 education (and three levels for HE and professional qualifications).**

Setting the 'credit value' of each unit — **The 'credit value' of a unit is formed by agreeing the notional learning time set for a learner to achieve each unit's learning outcomes.**

The Database of Units

Once these steps are completed, the units form a National Unit Database. Providers choose units from this database to build a portfolio of courses which they offer students. Specified combinations are required for specific qualifications.

The National Credit Transcript

The value and level of units (and hence the qualifications and awards which are derived from them) achieved by learners, will be indicated on a nationally recognised and accepted **Credit Transcript.** It could serve as the front sheet of the new National Record of Achievement and be used by admissions tutors and employers to select candidates.
Learners can enter and exit the world of learning at any age. New achievements will always be added to their transcript.
The Credit Transcript is one practical and universal end result of the adoption of a credit-based qualifications system.

'Credits and qualifications are added to your lifetime record of achievement'

Record of Achievement *Credit Transcript*

Credit Total:

Student Name **Jo Smith** — Entry Level — Level 1 **4**
Student Reg. No. **96202020** — Level 2 — Level 3 **45**
Date of Birth **1980** — Level 4 **4** — Level 5
Date of Transcript **2001** — Level 6 — Level 7

Date	Provider	Qualification Units Achieved	Credit Value	Level
1987	Old School	4 GCSEs	20	2
		GNVQ Unit – Leisure & Tourism	1	2
1988	First Bank Ltd	NVQ Unit – Banking	4	1
		First Aid Cert	1	2
2001	New College	GNVQ Business	16	3
		AS French	8	3
		NVQ Unit – Accountancy	4	4

How it Works

Building credit through life: Your choice is easier – you understand and compare all learning opportunities. On completion of the units in your chosen folder, the qualification AND its credits are added to your lifetime Credit Transcript, from which employers and educators can understand and compare your achievements with those of others who may have selected different folders.

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The learner is able to...

- explain to others the relative value of the qualification or award they have attained
- provide an employer with a much clearer picture of what they know and what they do
- identify more easily new learning choices from a universal and continually updated national database of units
- transfer what they learn between career paths, colleges and even countries
- see the Credit Transcript credit account grow, knowing that all units count as recognised achievement
- place their achievement in context with their (and others') overall learning experience
- build a unique, lifelong learning plan

It offers education and training providers...

- a flexible architecture which allows them to respond to change, strengthen existing provision and create new, valuable, tailor-made learning opportunities
- the ability to compare existing qualifications without necessarily redefining their inherent characteristics
- a national database of units from which new components can be added to existing programmes and qualifications in a measurable way
- the potential for closer collaboration between industry and education through a universally recognised and understood framework of learning achievement and values
- an efficient, centrally-managed database of units
- the ability to identify and communicate more effectively the resourcing and funding of education and training
- a way to assess their learning provision and plan for the future from a market-led perspective
- a rational basis for comparing students over time

The employer gains...

- a better understanding and comparison of the value of achievements of applicants and current employees
- a clearer way of expressing the qualifications and skills they need from job candidates
- a clearer way of identifying and assessing on-the-job training and additional opportunities
- a more motivated, skilled and flexible workforce
- a straightforward way to reward training

For the nation...

- provision of a diverse range of learning opportunities now linked by a common language and currency
- better value from existing and future learning
- a nation of citizens with a more positive predisposition to, and understanding of, the world of learning

your questions answered:

Q Does the proposal seek to replace A levels, NVQs and GNVQs, etc?

A No. It is designed to make these qualifications and their component parts easier to understand and compare. It will, of course, make it easier to develop the qualifications framework and to generate new qualifications in the next decade and beyond.

Q Hasn't The Dearing Review sorted out the qualifications framework already?

A To some extent, but FEDA believes many issues remain, especially in relation to lifelong learning. Comparison of different qualifications, in particular NVQs and other vocational qualifications has not been addressed by the Review. Also FE colleges are providers of both further and higher education and need a way of measuring achievement which is recognised in both sectors.

Q Don't modular/unit-based approaches mean lower standards?

A There is a long track record of modular/unit-based higher education and if qualifications are properly designed, the coherence and integrity of the subjects need not be damaged. In many respects unit-based/modular qualifications raise standards by ensuring that assessment covers a greater part of the learning and learners receive better feedback. Remember also that there is no reason why if a whole qualification is judged to be 'indivisible', it should not simply appear on the framework as a large unit.

Q Isn't notional time unhelpful and at odds with NVQ philosophy?

A Notional time is only used to compare units and qualifications. It is purely notional so learners do not need to serve any particular length of time for their achievement to be recognised. Achieving the learning outcomes or passing the exam is what counts — how you get there is not relevant. Notional time is used purely as a basis for comparison. GNVQs are already given a size in this way — no-one has come up with a better alternative.

Q Isn't FEDA promoting proliferation/duplication of awards and qualifications?

A This system does not seek to do this. On the contrary, FEDA believes that the national database of units will provide a much more rational basis for constructing qualifications, safeguarding standards, ensuring coherence and identifying overlap and duplication.

Q How much work is required to achieve this and what will it cost?

A Many elements of this are already in place. Many qualifications are already in unit/modular form and there is widespread familiarity in awarding bodies and institutions with using systems of levels and measures of size and credit value. FEDA proposes this system because it represents good value for money and would not only help learners, but also those responsible for the planning, funding and delivery of education and training.

Q Are parts of the system already operating this successfully?

A Yes. Credit initiatives have been undertaken in many FE colleges, on a regional basis in London, and in a number of other regions. Wales has a national initiative and will use a credit system for funding purposes from 1997 onwards. There is a wealth of evidence of the benefits of the approach but a national lead is now required.

The proposal is explained in more detail in the FEDA series *A Framework for Credit*. For further information call or write to:

FEDA

Tony Tait, Education Staff - Credit Frameworks
Further Education Development Agency, Citadel Place,
Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EH. Tel: [0171] 962 1280
E-Mail: ttait@feda.mhs.compuserve.com